

In Jamaica, small amounts of pot decriminalized

April 15 2015, by David McFadden



A Jamaican Rastafarian known as Nature smokes marijuana for spiritual purposes outside the Trench Town Culture Yard Museum in downtown Kingston, Jamaica, Wednesday, April 15, 2015, where he works as a tour guide. Drug law amendments decriminalizing small amounts of pot and paving the way for a lawful medical marijuana sector came into effect Wednesday in Jamaica. (AP Photo/David McFadden)

Drug law amendments that partially decriminalize small amounts of pot

and pave the way for a lawful medical marijuana sector went into effect Wednesday in Jamaica, a country where the drug has long been culturally entrenched.

Justice Minister Mark Golding described the reforms as "long overdue" on the Caribbean island, where the drug is revered by members of Jamaica's Rastafarian movement and used regularly by many ordinary Jamaicans. Jamaica's Parliament gave the amendments final approval in February.

The act makes possession of up to 2 ounces (56 grams) of [marijuana](#), or "ganja" as it's known locally, a petty offense that could result in a roughly \$5 ticket but not in an arrest or a criminal record.

Cultivation of five or fewer plants by any household is allowed. And Rastafarian adults are now permitted to use marijuana for sacramental purposes for the first time since the homegrown spiritual movement was founded in the 1930s.

In the late reggae icon Bob Marley's old neighborhood of Trench Town, a dreadlocked Rastafarian adherent known as Nature enjoyed a pipe stuffed full of "wisdom weed" during a Wednesday morning smoking session. He said Jamaican police, frequently criticized for heavy-handed behavior when dealing with young men smoking marijuana, will have to learn restraint.

"The Babylon police used to abuse the Rastaman for smoking the herb. But the times are changing and the agitation has to stop," Nature said in the Trench Town Culture Yard, where tree trunks are painted in the black, yellow, red and green of Rastafari, a movement that reveres Ethiopia's late Emperor Haile Selassie as a god and considers black people living outside Africa as captives.



Two Jamaican Rastafarians tend to their marijuana seedlings in the Trench Town neighborhood, in Kingston, Jamaica, Wednesday, April 15, 2015. Drug law amendments decriminalizing small amounts of pot and paving the way for a lawful medical marijuana sector came into effect Wednesday in Jamaica. (AP Photo/David McFadden)

Jamaican authorities have become emboldened by changes to pot laws in U.S. states and numerous countries, and they hope the island can become a player in the burgeoning medical marijuana industry, health tourism and the development of weed-derived products. The new amendments allow possession of marijuana for certified scientific research.

A new "cannabis licensing authority" is supposed to regulate the cultivation and distribution of marijuana for legal purposes. However, it's not clear when a regulated and taxed medical marijuana sector will get off the ground in Jamaica.

The changes will also affect some tourists. Foreigners who are prescribed [medical marijuana](#) abroad will be able to pay for Health Ministry permits authorizing them to legally buy up to 2 ounces (56 grams) of local weed for medical or therapeutic purposes during their stay.

Peter Bunting, the island's national security minister, has assured that the new law "does not create a free-for-all in the growing, transporting, dealing or exporting of ganja.

"The security forces will continue to rigorously enforce Jamaican law consistent with our international treaty obligations," he said earlier this year.



A Jamaican Rastafarian uses a pocket knife to prepare his marijuana for a morning smoking session in downtown Kingston, Jamaica, Wednesday, April 15, 2015. Drug law amendments decriminalizing small amounts of pot and paving

the way for a lawful medical marijuana sector came into effect Wednesday in Jamaica. (AP Photo/David McFadden)

Jamaican cannabis crusaders said there's still a lot of confusion about the changes.

"Lots of people are unclear about what decriminalization really means ... Nonetheless, we are happy about the progress made so far as it's a major step forward," said Delano Seiveright, director of the island's Cannabis Commercial and Medicinal Taskforce.

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